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CHARACTER AND FUNCTION OF MUSIC  
IN CHINESE CULTURE

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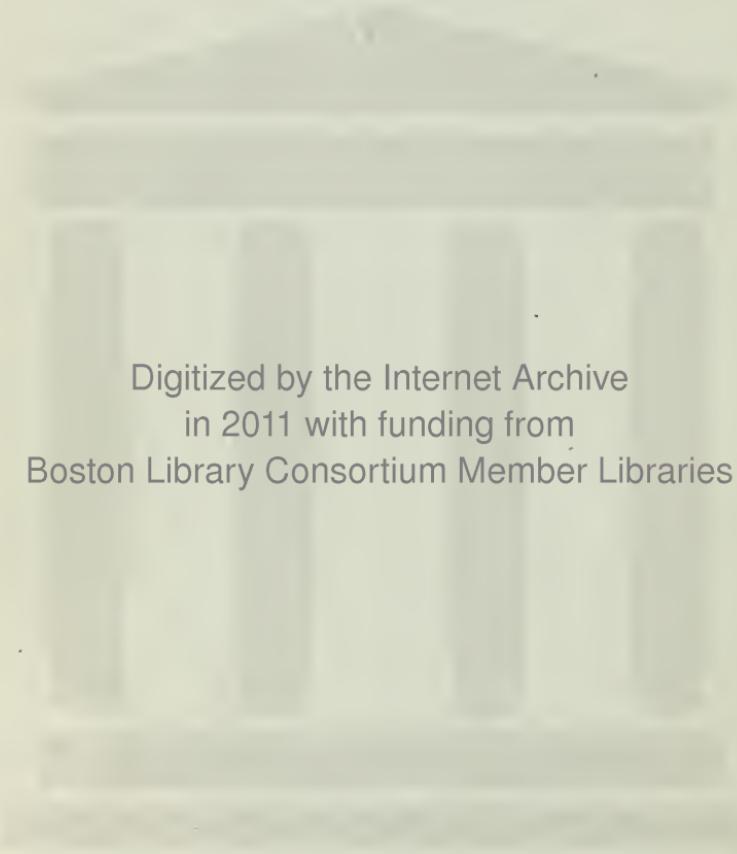
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# The Character and Function of Music in Chinese Culture

BLISS WIANT

Reprinted from  
ABSTRACTS OF DISSERTATIONS FOR THE YEAR, 1946  
George Peabody College for Teachers  
Nashville 4, Tennessee



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# THE CHARACTER AND FUNCTION OF MUSIC IN CHINESE CULTURE\*

BLISS WIANT

Music, in the Chinese sense, is best defined by translating the two characters which mean music, namely: yin yüeh or tone pleasure. A single tone, as from a bell or a stone chime, may give pleasure and would therefore constitute music. The development of this conception of music has led the Chinese into somewhat different modes of expressing it.

Because of the emphasis upon the pleasure which a single tone or many tones may provide, there has also been a selection of sound-producing materials whose varied timbre brings joy to the listener. The eight materials thus selected are:

1. Metal (such as bells and gongs)
2. Stone (such as jade chimes)
3. Silk (all stringed instruments used silk strings)
4. Bamboo (flutes of various kinds)
5. Gourd (ancient mouth organ originally used the gourd in its construction)
6. Pottery (ocarina)
7. Skin (various kinds of drums)
8. Wood (rhythm blocks, and the like)

In addition to these instrumental tone varieties, the human voice has also played an exceedingly important part in musical expression not only in actual singing of melody but in the inflections which the voice must use for correct speech. The inflections of the voice determine, in large part, the meaning of the spoken word as it conveys an idea.

The greatest source of information for this study is found in the twenty-four official dynastic histories of the Chinese which began with the Chou Dynasty (c. 1122-256 B.C.). During this period some of the greatest Chinese leaders flourished, as for instance K'ung-tzu (Confucius), Lao-Tzt (philosopher of the "tao" or "way"), Mêng-tzu (Mencius). In the writings and commen-

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\*Abstract of Contribution to Education No. 376.

taries of these great men and their followers there are many allusions to music and its function in life. The most notable of the writings have been translated into English by James Legge and others.

The official records since the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) have been compiled in a great encyclopedic library called *Ku Chin T'u Shu Chi Ch'êng* and published in 1844 in the T'ung-wên Shu Chü edition. These records have never been translated into English. For the purpose of this study, they were read in the original language.

A special portion of some of these official histories pertains entirely to music or both music and ceremony. This section is variously called "Yüeh Chih," "Yin Yüeh Chih," "Li Yüeh Chih," and the like. In addition to these official writings are many other books, written by scholarly men, which further manifest the organic interest of the Chinese people in music.

The idea that music brings harmony between the ruler and his subjects, between different members of society, between various members of the family both past and present, between a sovereign and his predecessors, is found again and again. Such a potential brings great joy and satisfaction to all concerned. The type of music which is used by the people and in official government functions is an index to the moral standards prevailing at any given time. Stately, elegant, soul-stirring music was termed ya yüeh. During the reign of Shih Huang Ti (the builder of the Great Wall c. 220 B.C.) many of the state documents were destroyed in order to eliminate tradition and the useless increment of centuries. Among other things were destroyed the official scores of ya yüeh. Every great ruler from his time until the end of the last dynasty attempted unsuccessfully to restore the traditional ya yüeh. Music of the inferior type was called su yüeh, vulgar and common. The struggle between these two types of music continued throughout the centuries.

Government officials were often commissioned to mingle with the common people so that they could transcribe their spontaneously expressed songs. So significant were these folk songs that a study of such material would thus indicate to the ruling sovereign the attitude of his subjects toward his reign. The Shih Ching

(Book of Odes), supposedly compiled by Confucius, is thought to contain some of the folk songs of his and previous times.

Great musical establishments characterized the reign of some sovereigns such as that one of the Chou Dynasty rulers who employed more than 1,100 men. Music for the court life, for the worship of heaven and earth, for memorials to ancestors and departed leaders, for state banquets and military celebrations, in fact, for almost every phase of official life, was provided. During times of political upheaval music was diminished but never eliminated. Since the Republic (1912) the government has, for the first time, officially introduced singing to the masses of the people. Formerly it was only for the members of the official families and professional performers.

The earliest mention of the formal establishment of an organization solely devoted to music and its function in government is during the reign of Emperor Wu (140-86 B.C.) of the Han Dynasty. He established the Yüeh Fu or Bureau of Music. All music masters lived and worked in this bureau. Soon after, the term yüeh fu became identified with the poetry which this bureau prepared for general use. Poetry was invariably chanted and often accompanied with instrumental music as well.

The dynasties which, after the Han Dynasty, magnified the use and function of music are:

1. The Sui Dynasty (581-618 A.D.). An orchestra of 288 instruments together with singers and dancers were employed at court. By the end of this dynasty, the official record reveals that there were 30,000 musicians and dancers supported by the state. The influence of non-Chinese cultures was evident in the list of instruments employed at this period. New types not previously catalogued appear. Further, a certain emperor of this dynasty limits the permissible types of music to seven. Two of these types are Chinese; the five remaining types are from Korea, India, An Kuo, Kuchah, and Wén K'ang. By the absorption of cultural influences from outside China's territory, China has greatly enriched her own life.

2. The Southern Sung Dynasty (1127-1279). The official record reveals the astonishing fact that 1,120 songs were used by

the government at such functions as the worship of the gods of the earth, fire, wind, rain, thunder, agriculture, silkworm, winter, dragon, and so on. Songs for festivities connected with the celebration of those scholars who had successfully passed examinations; memorials to the imperial dead; commitment exercises at the tomb, and the like were also provided. Prayers for good harvest, to the sun and moon, to the honorable spirits, to welcome the holy likeness of ancestors, for the names of the five great mountains, for the seas and waters—all these had their musical settings. The actions of the emperor, of the princes, of officials at court gatherings and assemblies, of the parents of the emperor were accompanied with music. At the time of the construction of buildings songs were sung. Even when criminals were pardoned by the emperor did music function with appropriate songs. What an honorable place did music have!

The musical establishments of the Ming (1368-1644) and Ch'ing (1644-1912) Dynasties were quite elaborate but were modeled after those of the former glorious periods. For the first time in the history of the Chinese, mass singing of the common people was sponsored by the Central Government of the Republic of China during the recent Japanese invasion. Music assumed a new function—that of uniting the whole population into a resisting whole.

When Buddhism first came to China in the first century of the Christian era, it brought a new culture and a self-consciousness which China had not had before. Buddhist sutra were written in Sanskrit—an alphabetical language, whereas the Chinese language was an inflected one written in symbols of ideas. From that time for a thousand years the Chinese increasingly regarded their inflected language, so that in the Sung Dynasty (960-1279) a type of poetry called tz'u came into prominence which was constructed entirely upon the inflections associated with the words. Soon after the close of the Sung Dynasty experimentation with the dramatization of this type of poetry stimulated incipient opera. Tz'u changed into ch'u (drama) and developed into perfection in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). During the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644-1912) it deteriorated and remains so even to this day.

There are four inflections in the national language (kuo yü) or mandarin. This dialect has been associated with the court life of China wherever the court was established. For the last five hundred years (1421-1928) Peking was the capital of all China with the consequence that the language of this city now becomes the language of all China. It is a powerful agent in unifying the people.

The four inflections of the Pekingese are the same as the four movements of the voice in song. Melodies can proceed in a monotone, they can rise, they can fall, they can move upwards or downwards (circumflex). These four movements can best be illustrated by the following monosyllabic dialogue:

(1st inflection) "Dead"—spoken in a raised monotone, with slightly plaintive inflection.

(2nd inflection) "Dead?"—simple query (upward).

(3rd inflection) "Dead?"—an incredulous query, long drawn out (circumflex).

(4th inflection) "Dead!"—a sharp and decisive answer (downward).

Inasmuch as there is no European language which uses inflections as a fundamental principle in the transferring of spoken ideas, this expression of Chinese culture has no counterpart whatsoever in the West. Chinese drama began and developed from this kind of literary expression. A few instruments, generally gongs, drums, cymbals, hu ch'in (two-stringed instruments), and the moon guitar accompany the drama.

To a Chinese, music is a fundamental and integral part of the world and of the universe itself. The music of the heavens finds its response on earth in the life which is found here. Plants, trees, sprouts, birds, horns, antlers, insects, mammalia, et cetera, respond to music in normal, healthy activity. Man uses music to express his inmost feelings; it makes him a highly sensitive being. The perception of the ears and eyes becomes sharp; the action of the blood and physical energies become harmonious. So sensitive is man to music that even his beloved instrument catches that sensitivity. An interesting story, well-known among scholars, tells of a sad experience of a friend of a certain musician who had died who

came to his obsequies to do him honor. The friend decided to play before his deceased friend the beloved instrument which the musician in life had loved. But when he began to play upon the ch'in it would not stay in tune—its spirit had been broken by the death of the master. So integrated with the life of the musician—with his sorrows, grief, love, filial piety, and ambition—was the ch'in that it would only respond to the master. Other instruments are also capable of expressing the inmost feelings of the human heart.

A certain man proposed to a beautiful maiden by playing appropriate music on the p'i-p'a (guitar). Two men were brought into close friendship by the music of the p'i-p'a. An army of soldiers who sang and played the folk songs of an enemy, encamped near by, so induced nostalgia among the enemy troops that they forsook their leader and returned to their homes. Thus, in so many ways music both inspires the expression of feeling in men and animals and is the means whereby these feelings may find expression.

Music functions in many ways every day, ways that are unfamiliar to most westerners. For instance, gourds made into the "flutes" are attached to the tails of pigeons so that the flues, imbedded in the sides of the gourd, make flute-like tones as the birds are in flight. Gourds of another type are made into cages for crickets who spend the winter in them. Their chirping is the symbol of family contentment and of harmony in the home. Beautifully modulated brass bells on rickshas fill the air with their clear tones as these conveyances glide through the walled-in hutungs (narrow alleys) and out into the market places. Over the walls, on summer evenings, float folk and operatic melodies sung or played on soft-toned flutes or on scratchy little hu ch'ins. Children and men often sing as they pass along their way in these narrow hutungs. Words of more than three thousand of these songs have been collected from Peking alone. In these and other songs, as one would naturally expect, can be found all the vices and virtues of the people. Love songs are rare inasmuch as love-making traditionally succeeds rather than precedes marriage. Subjects such as the following are common: children and babes, contentment with a little of the world's goods, quarreling husbands and wives, lulla-

bies, the Great Wall and other important scenic objects, playmates, workmen and their everyday life, river chanteys, and so on. Wedding and funeral processions, colorful to the eye and interesting to the ear, parade through the streets on "lucky" days. The streets of villages and cities abound in the music created by peddlars who not only sing of their wares but also use instruments whose tone quality identifies certain articles which they have for sale. Residents, all of whom live behind walls, depend upon these sounds to make them aware, not only of the articles which they sell, but also of the time of day, the day of the week or month, the season of the year. So regular are the peddlars in their daily routine and circuit and in the articles which they sell that they partially substitute for actual timepieces. In general, peddlars who sell edibles announce their wares by means of songs or melodic fragments. Each peddler composes his own melody. In the case of other sound-producing media there is no such freedom. For instance, the sound of a small drum indicates a cloth vendor; the clashing of two small, brass cups makes a sound that indicates the soft drink vendor; an instrument akin to a large tuning fork gives forth a twang which advertises the available services of a barber. There are forty kinds of such instruments. When they are all in action, the result is a veritable symphony of sound. Any person, unable to see a peddler's goods, could tell by the characteristic sound of his instrument just what he had to sell.

In the field of religious music China displays a rich body of musical expression. The sole survivor of the many ancient rites and ceremonies, many of which were abandoned after the establishment of the Republic in 1912, is that which honors the memory of Confucius. Twice a year, at the vernal and autumnal equinox, this ceremony is very formally conducted in the great temples of China which are dedicated to honoring the great sage and teacher. Richly decorated musical instruments, together with the chanting of men and boys, produce the stately, dignified music similar in nature to Gregorian chant. The ceremony proper begins at dawn. Only officials are permitted to attend, although visitors may witness the rehearsals which take place the evening previous to the actual celebration. On the large marble platform before the hall are placed in fixed and traditional order the various instruments

employed. Sets of sixteen bells and a corresponding number of jade pieces, all on highly ornate frames, drums, psalteries, large and small (sê and ch'in), and a few other instruments compose the orchestra. Men and boys chant with the instruments.

Even more resplendent was the annual presentation, by the emperor, of sacrifices at the Altar of Heaven, the largest and most impressive altar ever built by human hands. This ceremony took place at the time of the winter solstice. Since the coming of a democratic form of government this ceremony has been deleted.

Temples where Buddha and other religious leaders are worshiped also provide musical expression by the reading of their sacred books, the chanting at the time of their worship, and at many other times and seasons when the voice and instruments are both used to embellish and dignify human experience.

One can never forget the spirit of timelessness which seems to inhabit the many ancient temples of the hills and valleys of this great land. Dwelling within the walls of the Buddhist temples are those whose one great desire is to achieve nirvana. Music functions to this end. On entering the temple grounds one sees on either side of the main entrance, two large towers. In one is a large bell, in the other a large drum. These two instruments, together with others—such as gongs, wood blocks, iron slabs—placed in various courtyards and buildings of the large enclosures are regulated in their use so that they synchronize during moments of high worship. A strange and powerful spell is woven into the fabric of human experience by the music which can be heard at such times.

In the many ways indicated above, this investigation shows the intimate bearing of music on all phases of Chinese life. A generalization seems wholly dependable which maintains that no student could fully understand Chinese life who did not approach it, at least partially, through the medium of music.

This investigation might be called a social study of music in China. It presents a background study of the elements of life in China now and in the past. Against this background it explains and demonstrates how music has played and is playing an unusual part in the political, literary, social, religious, and everyday life of the Chinese people.

Inasmuch as their cultural patterns in the field of music are generally unfamiliar, it has been necessary to provide a larger setting than would ordinarily have been the case. Present-day interest in the life of the Orient, and especially China, makes such a study timely.

In China, the cultured person knows more about western cultures than the cultured person of the West knows about eastern cultures. The day for mutual understanding has arrived.













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